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ABSTRACT

This digest addresses the decline in the willingness of U.S. youth to participate in service to the community or nation and suggests service learning as a possible remedy for the decline. There are long-term benefits of service learning: (1) helping to build community support for education; (2) facilitating a closer bond between school, community, and home; and (3) endowing students with a sense of civic efficacy and the sense that they can have a positive impact on civic affairs. Suggestions on how to structure an effective service learning program are provided. Contains eight references. (EH)

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Effective democracy requires a healthy balance between civic rights and obligations. Most Americans appear to be well informed of and eager to protect their civic rights, but too many lack commitment to their civic obligations for the proper functioning of a constitutional democracy.

The Decline of Responsible Citizenship. In recent decades, there has been a disturbing decline in the willingness of America's youth to participate in service to the community or nation. According to "People for the American Way" (1989, 51-97), there are five major reasons why young Americans are reluctant to serve.

The first is lack of time. Students complain that too many demands are placed on them, such as competing for good grades, needs for after-school jobs, athletic commitments, and family obligations, which leave little time for other endeavors. A second reason often cited by students is the lack of parental encouragement. When parents do not have time to devote to Boy Scouts, community projects, or the American Heart Association, their children do not have role models for civic service. We are often asking students to perform services that are beyond their realm of experience and therefore completely foreign to them. According to some experts, however, perhaps the greatest reason is that we simply do not ask young people to get involved. We incorrectly assume that youngsters will seek opportunities to serve and disregard their need to be invited.

The final two reasons identified by this study involve the perceptions of youth toward democracy. Many young Americans do not understand the obligations of the citizen in a democratic society. They are well aware of their personal rights and freedoms, but are sadly ignorant of their duties. Finally, most youth have too little faith in our political institutions and leaders and in their ability to bring about positive change.

Morris Janowitz (1983) takes a slightly different approach to the question of why youngsters are reluctant to serve by suggesting that most have been conditioned to act on their own narrow self-interests. They perceive national and community service as contrary to their own personal economic goals and as a restrictive environment that infringes upon their quest for personal pleasure. Civic education must work to reaffirm the beliefs of young Americans that self-interests are always deeply rooted in community and nation, and that serving one's nation and community also serves oneself.

Service Learning: A Possible Remedy for the Decline of Responsible Citizenship. There is an ancient Chinese proverb which states, "Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I will remember. Involve me, and I will understand" (Seigel and Rockwood 1993, 67). Service learning seeks to implement this wisdom by involving young people in community service projects that are coordinated between the school and community. These projects are integrated into the academic curriculum and designed to support civic education. This allows students to use experience in the community as a basis for critical reflection in the classroom about the nature of democracy. Lessons in the classroom become a basis for examination of the citizen's role in the community.

Proponents of service learning believe the factors that discourage youth service would be eliminated if youngsters were given the opportunity to experience service in a carefully controlled and meaningful environment. If young persons had this opportunity, they would come to understand that citizenship requires a balance between giving and receiving. They would learn to appreciate democracy as a social compact in which the members of society mutually care for each other, their community, and their nation. Youngsters would become empowered contributors along with adults in improving their community and nation. When young people are given such opportunities, participatory citizenship becomes what Alexis de Tocqueville referred to as "habits of the heart" (Democracy In America, 1835).

The Long-Term Benefits of Service Learning. The experiences of students who are involved in service learning programs benefit the school, community, and young people. Service learning helps to build community support for education. When programs are developed collaboratively by the community and the school, citizens begin to see that schools are responsive to the needs of the community, and a sense of community ownership and pride are nurtured.

Service learning also facilitates a closer bond between school, community, and home. Through community projects, parents are more easily drawn into the educational process. Community service provides an easily accessible forum which serves to encourage parental involvement in the education of their children. Parents who often feel alienated from the normal academic routine of school find a more comfortable common ground upon which they can become involved. As a result, parents become part of the educational process and begin to share accountability for their children's education along with the school, thus strengthening the educational process.

Further, the community is benefited by service learning because students are endowed with a sense of civic efficacy, the attitude that they should, can, and will have an impact on civic affairs. Young people become more aware of the balance between rights and responsibilities as citizens of a democratic community, and as a result they are more likely to act upon this awareness in ways that benefit the local community and nation.

Many students discover a renewed sense of meaning in

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education when they are able to examine first hand the community's social problems, or participate in the operations of local government. Finally, the infusion of community service into the curriculum leads to "an increase in student achievement and a significant decrease in rates of truancy and vandalism" (Massachusetts Department of Education 1986, 5). Service learning helps students to see the value of education through direct experiences in the community, and the process develops more positive attitudes toward school and education in general.

How to Structure an Effective Service Learning Program. There are several key elements in an effective service learning program. The initial task is to develop clearly articulated goals that can be achieved through a reasonable degree of effort. It is of vital importance that students involved in community projects achieve success.

Secondly, the project must be of real consequence to the community and be perceived by students as fulfilling a real need. It is important that students feel that they are trusted with important tasks and are not simply being patronized. It is strongly urged that the school and community work together closely during the early stages of development. A task force may be assembled or community meetings held to determine the real needs of the community and form consensus about what projects may or may not be appropriate. It is very important to get community members involved and keep them informed at a very early stage, for their later support will be of vital importance to the success or failure of the program.

Other important keys to success involve the student-centered aspects of a service learning project. Perhaps the most important component, with respect to the student, is that the project be developmentally appropriate. Organizers must try to ensure that projects which require a higher level of maturity or intellectual ability are avoided for younger children. In contrast, projects that are puerile or not intellectually stimulating are to be avoided for older students. It is also important that students are involved at the initial stage of any project and that a visible or tangible result or product can be recognized. It is important that students be able to experience the positive self-esteem and self-worth that results from successful completion of a project.

The final key ingredients involve the connection between community service projects and the school. One of the unique components of service learning is the interconnection of community experience and classroom work. Once community projects have been identified, community members, administrators, teachers, and students must develop a curriculum to address the specific needs of the projects. Service learning depends heavily on the continuous connection between classroom learning and real world experience. As Benjamin Barber emphasizes, "Community service can only be an instrument of education when it is connected to an academic learning experience in a classroom setting" (1992, 254).

When developing the supporting classroom curriculum, teachers must lead the way. Therefore, teachers and all supporting school personnel must be provided with extensive pre-service and staff development opportunities. Service learning is a fairly new movement in civic education, but ample literature and qualified educators are available, which ensures that the staff can be prepared to develop a solid curriculum.

Finally, constant re-evaluation of the program's success is essential. The entire content of the program should be extensively reviewed annually to determine whether the original intent and goals of the program are being achieved.

Aristotle once wrote, "We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts" (MacNichol 1993, 9). Likewise, we become good citizens by practicing the art of good citizenship. Service learning provides the practice that will renew civic commitment to our community and nation, thereby strengthening American democracy.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Services (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2842; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1440 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from the UMI reprint service.

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